

PHILOSOPHICAL DEBATES IN POSTMODERNISM . [1](#)

by

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My conception of postmodernism is thus not meant to be a monolithic thing but to allow evaluations of other currents within this system--which cannot be measured unless one knows what the system is. In the second I want to propose a dialectical view in which we neither see postmodernism as immoral, frivolous or reprehensible because of its lack of high seriousness, nor as good in the McLuhanist, celebratory sense of the emergence of some wonderful new utopia.

Features of both are going on at once.

- Fredric Jameson, "Interview", in *Flash Art* .

The concept of postmodernism, in so far as it defines itself in relation to modernism, whether in the form of negative appraisal of the latter as is the case with Jean-Francois Lyotard in France, or in the form of positive evaluation of the latter in relation to the former in the instance of Jurgen Habermas in West Germany, or in the form of a dialectical equipoise between the two as is apparent with Fredric Jameson in the United States, has seized the national imagination of many philosophers and literary critics in the late capitalist countries. These differential national responses to the experience of postmodernity, to be sure, reflects and is determined, to a large extent, by the legacies of the quality of modernism implanted in the national cultural textures of each particular country. Whereas in France modernism was experienced as a cultural dominant precisely because nearly all artistic schools and literary movements, stretching from Cubism through Surrealism to Dadaism, were converging towards Paris, a Paris about to undergo its last moments as the capital of the nineteenth century, in West Germany, because modernism and the Weimar Republic perished in the catastrophe of 1933, modernism has been understood as a missed political experience derivable from cultural processes, and still different, in America modernism has been experienced as the absence of philosophical sophistication and complexity in the national cultural texture because of the literary emigration of Eliot, Pound and Hemingway. What is clear is that these different national cultural coordinates of positioning modernism and postmodernism to each other are integrated into the sociological coordinates of these countries' national histories: the fact that in France class conflicts and class struggles are usually fought out to their bitter end, as was the case in 1789; in Germany, the formation of a national state was at a late date and its nature was always a commingling of

class impurities which later proved to be unpredictably explosive; and in America, the mythology of the frontier in its history has made that country not only petulant, but also to believe in limitlessness of its possibilities.

It is in these three countries that a real battle has been going on as to the political and philosophical configurations of the theoretical structure of postmodernism should take. Of the major European countries, Italy and Britain have, up to the present, been mainly side-shows: the writings of Perry Anderson and Terry Eagleton in England, and those of Carlo Guilio Argan in Italy, have been mainly reacting to confrontations taking place elsewhere. ² This is the reason that, though in and of themselves they are brilliant reflections on this concept, these writings will not be of our immediate concern. The contours of the cultural geography of postmodernism demand that West Germany, France and America be at the center of this rough sketch. In fact, the form of the cultural geography of this concept, which is in the process of mapping itself on a world-wide scale, confirms Franco Moretti's recently perceptive suggestion that artistic movements and literary schools should be charted in relation to, or in accordance with, the dialectical unity between their temporal ordering and geographical spacing. ³ In the European context, Moretti shows how the novel and modern tragedy, in their relation to each other and in opposition to each other define a different Europe: a Europe of the English and the French novel (Proust and Joyce) or a Europe of the Scandanavian drama (Ibsen and Strindberg). ⁴ The Russia of Tolstoy, Chekhov and Turgenev, in its unalloyed mixture of the novel genre and drama, was the exception; hence the exceptionality of the Russian Revolution of 1917, made it all the more unique. Moretti argues that modernism was the first cultural movement in history which constituted itself as an intellectual system on a world-wide scale. Unfortunately, for Moretti Europe constitutes the whole of the world. Nonetheless, Moretti's observations are very perceptive. It could be argued that perhaps postmodernism is in the process of making itself a world-wide cultural phenomenon and intellectual system following on the path opened by the American way of life. The cultural geography of postmodernism indicates interesting and fascinating patternings.

That the concept of postmodernism is a very important historical construct periodizing the disappearance of a particular cultural moment and the emergence of another, can be seen from the fact that many journals and reviews of high intellectual repute have devoted special issues to its therizing: *Telos*, *New German Critique*, *Praxis International*, *Critical Inquiry*, *Diacritics* and many others. Others, like the *New Left Review*, have devoted essays to the political unmasking of postmodernism. The very naming of these reviews and journals reveals the fact that postmodernism has had to define itself within the ambience of historical materialism, whether in agreement or dissension. This is related to the fact that historical materialism articulates a theoretically and historically

formulated coherent structure of history. In fact, the theorizing of postmodernism in France, in West Germany and in America is undeclaredly but irrevocably tied to the fortunes of Marxism within each particular country: the defeat of Marxism in France at the hands of structuralism and poststructuralism has meant invariably that Lyotard's concept of postmodernism is ahistorical and anarchistic, as was clear in an art exhibition he organized recently on the 'Postmodern Condition'; [5](#) the hostility of Habermas to postmodernism, especially as formulated by Lyotard, is informed by the consolidated robust tradition of Marxist philosophy of the Frankfurt School, which nonetheless is not without its own problems and difficulties; in America, the dialectic of negative and positive appraisal of postmodernism exemplified by Fredric Jameson's Marxism, is necessitated by the need to avoid an all-out clash between the two (modernism and postmodernism) in order that Marxism may seed within the cultural texture of American society into a major intellectual force as it has never done before, and partly because Jameson has learnt from Jean-Paul Sartre that the dialectic by its very nature is characterised by the dialectic of progression and regression. It is partly these historical coordinates that account for the differential national readings of what postmodernism is.

Undoubtedly, it was in Paris that the first serious philosophical expositions on postmodernism emerged to occupy center-stage upon the expulsion of Marxism from France in 1977 by the combined forces of structuralism and poststructuralism. It ought perhaps to be made clear that although the theories of postmodernism first emerged in France, it was in America that the actual artistic products of postmodernism appeared: the paintings of Andy Warhol and Robert Rauschenberg; the music of John Cage and Philip Glass; the video music of Laurie Anderson; the writings of Ishmael Reed and Raymond Federman; the poetry of John Ashbery; the video art work of Nam June Paik; and the modern dance of David Gordon and Twyla Tharp. The list could be extended on, for these are only primary examples. The reasons for the hegemonic appearance of postmodernist artistic works in America, beside the need of capitalism for new products for commodification purposes and maximization of profits, is because in America modernism as an artistic movement never held sway in the cultural fabric of the nation as it had in France. Since America has never had a profound tradition of philosophising on art, it was left to the French philosophers to attempting such theorizing. But the French philosophers, being nationalistic in relation to the United States, and not believing that an international artistic movement of real importance in the last quarter of the twentieth-century could take place outside the boundaries of France, contented themselves with analysing the postmodern conditions in France, rather than the actual artistic products emanating from America. In parenthesis, this ofcourse is not true of all French philosophers living in the postmodern era: witness the brilliant writings of Michel Leiris and Gilles Deleuze on the art work of Francis Bacon.

Probably three constitutive and interrelated features characterise Jean-Francois Lyotard's theory of postmodernism: the contestation of what he calls 'metanarratives' which for him since time immemorial have blighted social theory and philosophical diaquisation; a rejection of what he terms a totalitarian subject and its totalizing reason, hence for him the emergence of postmodernism announces the end of rationality; and the aesthetic mode of postmodernism is that of the sublime, which Lyotard interconnects to Kant's theory of aesthetics. [6](#) For Lyotard metanarratives are all the philosophies of history which attempt to absolutize human knowledge by providing definitive explanations of society. Though the undeclared target is specifically Marxism, Lyotard holds Hegel responsible for it, for it was him who developed the modern structure of dialectical theory. Lyotard believes that it is because of the totalizing nature of Marxism in the domain of history that the twentieth century has been beseted by an epidemic of totalitarian regimes. For him it is dialectical theory which attempts to provide total explanations of human nature. Hence for Lyotard the 'totalitarian subject' which according to a particular metanarrative theory of history should be able to bring about the transformation of society, should be opposed unrelentingly. In effect, for Lyotard postmodernism also announces the disappearance of history. It is clear that Lyotard'd project of postmodernism belongs to the same political ambience as the Second Cold War. It is for this reason that Terry Eagleton has launched a brilliantly spirited critique of lyotard from an epistemological and political perspective. [7](#) Albrecht Wellmer in West Germany has convincingly showed the untenability of such a project postmodernism as theorized by Jean-Francois Lyotard. [8](#) For Wellmer the consequence of lyotard's theory of postmodernism in a real sense means the rejection of ". . . the project of modernity, the project of European Enlightenment, or finally also the project of Greek and Western civilization." [9](#)

It was in order to forestall thid from happening that Jurgen Habermas intervened in the debate on postmodernism. In his critique of Lyotard, Habermas also includes Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and other Parisian philosophical acolytes. In the main, Habermas' article, "Modernity versus Postmodernity", sought to defend the philosophical legacy of the European Enlightenment which had succeeded in extending the rationalization process in the modern world. This tradition of the Enlightenment was continued by, and tied into, the classical sociological legacy of Max Weber. Both the French Enlightenment philosophers and Kant had achieved the rationalization of human knowledge by separating it into three domains: the spheres of science, art and ethics. [10](#) Though these systems (domains) are interconnected to each other, they possessed their singular internal logic. By this separation, the domain of human knowledge was opened to accomodating rationally modern complex social processes. In short, the

Enlightenment thinkers showed the logic the process of rationality in human history and in society. This unquestionably was the great contribution of Karl Marx. This was achieved through the metanarratives which Lyotard had sought to roll back.

In a way, Habermas was defending the rationalization process achieved by modern capitalism. Though Derrida, Lyotard and Foucault sought to roll back the achievement of the modern project in their particular ways, even disputing among themselves, they were binded together by their epistemological politics of reaction. It is not accidental that Habermas has characterized them, collectively as neo-conservatives. [11](#) This unquestionably is a correct assessment. Their conservatism lies in the fact that they succeeded in bringing about the collapse of historical materialism in France. The poststructuralism of Derrida and Foucault and the postmodernism of Lyotard have aligned themselves with the politics of reaction which reign supreme in France today. With justice, Perry Anderson in **In the Tracks of Historical Materialism** has characterised Paris in the following terms: "Paris today is the capital of European intellectual reaction, in much the same way that London was thirty years ago." [12](#) But to revert back to the issue raised by Habermas: it is clear that Habermas' own presentation raises certain complications. It is with justice that Peter Burger, the German literary scholar, has reproached Habermas for not specifying the kind of unity which binds together the spheres of science, ethics and art: whether the organic unity so characteristic of Hegel's subjective idealism or the synthetic unity so pronounced in Kant's objective idealism. [13](#) This choice of either is no small matter for it determines one's understanding of history and of epistemology. As Lucio Colletti has shown in **Hegel and Marxism** , before his recent tragic apostasy, the choice between Hegel and Kant is fundamental in determining one's understanding of the objective structures of, and intervening in, science. Recently Habermas has acknowledged that the irrationalism of the Parisian philosophers has been opened for them by the irrational critique of the Enlightenment legacy by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in **Dialectic of Enlightenment** . [14](#) The recent writings of Jurgen Habermas have been attempting to rectify the disastrous consequences of this Frankfurt School intellectual legacy, of which he is the last great member.

Probably the writings and reflections of Fredric Jameson on postmodernism have been the most seminal, cogent, brilliant and simply unsurpassable. Their range of brilliance more than equals the level attained by the aesthetic debates within German Marxism in the 1930s: among its participants were Walter Benjamin, George Lukacs, Bertolt Brecht, Theodor Adorno and Ernst Bloch. [15](#) In an interview Jameson says that the main object of his intervention and participation in the debate on postmodernism is to indicate the possible forms and pathways of

resistance to its cultural dominance. [16](#) It is this very idea of postmodernism as the cultural dominant characteristic of late capitalism, that has made the intervention of Jameson so novel, fascinating and undoubtedly exhilarating also. The political and theoretical consequences of this novelty will be clear in a moment. Just before joining in on the debate on postmodernism, his intervention turning and revolutionising the terms of the debate and transforming the terrain of the struggle, Jameson wrote an essay, "The Politics of Theory: Ideological Positions in the Postmodern Debate", which shows that aesthetic positions on this concept are in fact political positions in relation to late capitalism and as to the nature of history. In the essay, Jameson assesses the positions of Jurgen Habermas, Hilton Kramer, Tom Wolfe, Christopher Jencks and Manfredo Tafuri. Without necessarily entering into the complex arguments articulated by Jameson in the essay, it is essential to quote a few sentences of what he has to say about two of our protagonists: Habermas and Lyotard. Of Lyotard the following excerpt is pertinent: ". . . Lyotard's aesthetic positions, however, cannot be adequately evaluated in aesthetic terms, since what informs them is an essentially social and political conception of a new social system beyond classical capitalism (our old friend, 'post-industrial society') . . ." [17](#) Of Habermas, this cannot escape one's notice: "For Habermas, however, the vice of postmodernism consists very centrally in its politically reactionary function, as the attempt everywhere to discredit a modernist impulse Habermas himself associates with the bourgeois Enlightenment and which the latter's still universalizing and Utopian spirit." [18](#) It was after cartographing the different political positions in the debate on postmodernism, that Jameson was able to intervene with tremendous force, thereby overturning the terms of the debate.

The unique novelty of Jameson's theory of postmodernism is that it situates this phenomenon within the historical, sociological, cultural and intellectual coordinates of our particular moment. As such, postmodernism is a cultural dominant of our time, homologous and contemporaneous with the structures of late capitalism, specifically multi-national capitalism. [19](#) In this essay, "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism", which indeed is a great document, Jameson, in effect, argues that postmodernism is the cultural expression on a world-wide scale of American military hegemony. In other words, postmodernism is the extension to the whole world (even in some ways incorporating certain socialist countries) of the American way of life. Within the field force of postmodernism, cultural products and artistic works have certain constitutive features in contradistinction to modernist works: the elimination of historicity, and the absence of depth, hermeneutically and philosophically. [20](#) The theoretical concepts within this cultural dominant, are more aligned to spatial movement, rather than coordinated to an intensive temporal investigation. For Jameson, postmodernism is the cultural logic of late capitalism. In another

context, he has argued that the artistic mode of this cultural phenomenon is more allegoric than symbolic. [21](#) The dominant style of postmodernism is that of pastiche and parody. For Jameson, this cultural logic of postmodernism is practically dominant in all the contemporary arts: characteristic of the performing arts, the visual arts, in literature as well as in architecture.

Another novelty in Jameson's argumentation on postmodernism is that he refuses to moralize about this cultural phenomenon. Following Marx, who had argued that capitalism was simultaneously progressive and regressive, he argues that this cultural dominant is also simultaneously negative and positive. For instance, in relation to the genre of the novel, the return to the linear narrative and the presence of the collective subject in the postmodernist novel, as opposed to the narrative indirections and the old personal subject which were characteristic of the modernist novel, have been registered as an enormous gain. It is here that Jameson sees the importance of postmodernism in relation to modernism. He also registers the fact that postmodernism is an attempt at integrating high culture and low culture, whereas modernism always saw itself and identified itself with high culture. Several objections can be raised to the way Jameson has theorized the structure of this cultural dominant. Mike Davis has objected to the readiness with which Fredric Jameson has conflated postmodernism with late capitalism; he sees this as the ". . . return of essentialism and reductionism with a vengeance." [22](#) Undoubtedly, this critique is plausible. What is equally unclear in Jameson's theory of postmodernism is the nature of a Marxist cultural practice, to effect a change or an influence, within this cultural dominant. Nonetheless, Jameson's theorization of this cultural phenomenon has no equal within contemporary cultural thought. It establishes continuity with the cultural debates which were ravaging German Marxism half a century ago, which were the greatest Marxist intellectual debates of the twentieth-century.

[1](#) The essay was commissioned by *Awa-Finnaba: An African Literary Cultural Journal* in West Berlin in the Fall of 1987. The journal was collectively assembled by black South Africans in exile. It was not published because the editorial board of the review doubted the relevance of postmodernism to the black experience.

[2](#) Terry Eagleton, "Capitalism, Modernism and Post-Modernism", in *New Left Review*, no.152, July-August 1985, pp.60-73; Perry Anderson, "Modernity and Revolution", in *New Left Review*, no.144, March-April 1984, pp.96-113; Giulio carlo Argan, "Issues on Postmodernism", in *Flash Art*, no.121, December 1985-January 1986.

[3](#) Franco Moretti, "The Moment of Truth", in *New Left Review*, no.157, July-

August 1986, p.56.

[4](#) *ibid.*, p.57.

[5](#) John Rajchman, "The Postmodern Museum", in *Art in America* , October 1985, pp.111-117, p.171.

[6](#) Jean-Francois Lyotard, **The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge** , University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

[7](#) Terry Eagleton, "Capitalism, Modernism and Post-Modernism", *op cit.*;
"Awakening from Modernity", *Times Literary Supplement* , February 20, 1987, p.194.

[8](#) Albrecht Wellmer, "On the Dialectic of Modernism and Postmodernism", *Praxis International* , vol.4 no.4, December 1984, pp.337-362.

[9](#) *ibid.*, p.337

[10](#) Jurgen Habermas, "modernity versus Postmodernity", *New German Critique* , no.22, Winter 1981, p.8-9.

[11](#) *ibid.*, p.13.

[12](#) Perry Anderson, **In the Tracks of Historical Materialism** , London, Verso, 1983, p.32.

[13](#) Peter Burger,

[14](#) Jurgen Habermas, "The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment", *New German Critique* , no.26, Spring-Summer 1982, pp.13-30.

[15](#) Ernst Bloch, et al., **Aesthetics and Politics** , New Left Books, London, 1976.

[16](#) Fredric Jameson, "An Interview", *Flash Art* , no.131, December 1986-January 1987, p.70.

[17](#) Fredric Jameson, "The Politics of Theory: Ideological Positions in the Postmodern Debate", *New German Critique* , no.33, Fall 1984, p.60.

[18](#) *ibid.*, p.58.

[19](#) Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism", *New Left Review* , no.146, July-August 1984, pp.53-92.

[20](#) Fredric Jameson, "An Interview", *op. cit.*, p.69.

[21](#) Fredric Jameson, "An Interview", *Diacritics* , no.12, Autumn 1982, p.82.

[22](#) Mike Davis, "Urban Renaissance and the Spirit of Postmodernism", *New Left Review* , no.151, May-june 1985, p.107.